

By AMITA KANEKAR



So Chief Minister Pramod Sawant wants to rebuild the temples destroyed by the Portuguese. 'Mandir Sanskriti' or the Indian Constitution?

And, at a time when the pandemic continues on the rampage, when Goans have seen two years of lost jobs and depleted incomes, when Goan kids are out of school for the second year running, and when environmental destruction is threatening our lives in not just the long term but also the short, this Chief Minister of Goa asks us to "once again preserve Hindu *sanskriti* and *mandir sanskriti*."

What does Sawant mean by these *sanskritis*? Surely not the regular expressions of devotion and worship offered by Goan Hindus in the many temples across the state, and also in their own homes. Such expressions are not under any threat, so there is no need to urge people to preserve them. Nor is the population of practising Hindus on the decline in Goa. What he seems to be referring to is tradition, i.e. the traditional culture that temples embodied in the past, which might well be seen as under threat today, thanks to criticism from within and without.

But this traditional temple culture is rooted in caste. So, does our CM want to preserve the open casteism, including untouchability, that is still being practised in most Goan temples, many of which see everything – from access to employment – being decided by caste? Does he want to preserve the traditional caste-based reservations in temples, that keep all privileges, *maan* (honours), and decision-making only for the mahajans of the temple, who are chosen by virtue of their birth and gender, and are always of the dominant castes? Does he want to preserve the denial of certain spaces and actions, like entry into the *garbacud* (sanctum sanctorum) for the purpose of worship, to other worshippers? Does he want to preserve the denial of entry even into the hall to worshippers of the so-called low castes? Does he want to preserve the denial of access to the temples for women worshippers in their menses, and widowed/divorced women?

One might, in fact, ask why this supposed Chief Minister is talking at all about Hindu *sanskriti* and *mandir sanskriti* at a function to mark the 60th anniversary of the end of Portuguese rule in Goa. Has he forgotten that he holds a Constitutional position? As a Chief Minister of twenty-first-century Goa in twenty-first-century India, one might have expected Sawant to at least offer lip-service to the Indian Constitution, which stands for liberty, equality and fraternity of all citizens. If he had read the Preamble to the Constitution even once, he would have known that his responsibility is not of preserving any traditional *sanskriti*, but of reforming traditions, of ensuring – at least today, 60 years late – that Goan temples end these shameful discriminatory practices that violate the Constitutional rights of Indian citizens, and thus become fit to be religious institutions of the modern world. 60 years on,

why isn't he talking about repealing the 'Code of Customs and Usages of Gentile Hindus', still on the lawbooks and brimming with unConstitutional provisions? Or, at least, amending the 'Mandir Sanskriti' or the Indian Constitution? unjust provisions of the Devasthan Regulation Act (Regulamento das Mazanias)?

But expecting anything else from Sawant is, of course, futile. It is no coincidence that his inflammatory talk of rebuilding destroyed temples – and effectively destroying whatever is currently on the site, most likely to be other shrines – comes on the eve of elections in Goa and elsewhere. Violent attacks on Christians across the country have almost overtaken those on Muslims, while public calls for genocide go ignored by governments, and a different kind of official attack has now been launched on the Missionaries of Charity – the Christian organisation famous all over the world for working for some of the poorest and most destitute people in India. In Goa, in the meantime, you have the increasing Ayodhyafication (as it has been insightfully termed) of the ruined Sancoale Church, with Hindu rituals being conducted illegally on the premises, under the so-called 'justification' that it is the site of a destroyed temple, and without any criticism, forget action, by the authorities. Hate and violence are a shortcut to power, so it would seem.

Sawant now says that he never meant the destruction of “churches or mosques”, a statement akin to shutting the stable after the horse has bolted. Besides which, mosques were themselves destroyed by the Portuguese, long before they started on the temples – so shouldn't he be including them in his rebuilding plans? But, for the BJP-RSS, only Hindus can be victims. What of the long, almost-vanished, pre-Portuguese heritage of the Buddhists and Jains in Goa, and, even more so, that of the indigenous communities, which is being destroyed even today? They are to be forgotten. For the Hindutvawadis, pre-Portuguese Goa was Hindu, irrespective of what the historical record shows. Hindus and their shrines are thus the only ones entitled to take over things today. In the era of land-grab, will this be the biggest land-grab of them all?

Amazingly, in the midst of all this depressing, diversionary, and violence-fomenting politics, one still can find rays of hope. One came peeking from Karnataka, where a new Anti-Conversion Law, targeting the minoritised communities, has come into force, and where the People's Union for Civil Liberties documented 39 incidents of violence against Christians in 2021. Despite this atmosphere of intimidation, when Bajrang Dal goons barged into a Dalit home in Tumkur district on Christmas day, and demanded to know why the people gathered there were engaged in Christian worship, the women in the house did not get cowed down. They stood up to the goons, questioned their locus standi in criticising their religious beliefs and practices, and also complained to the police. The latter, who are often known to collude with the mobs, regularly arresting the victims of violence instead of the perpetrators, could not intimidate the women either, and had to be content with refusing to register their

complaint.



This is increasingly, how it is. Nobody, not the CMS, nor their so-called law and order machineries, is going to protect our Constitutional rights for us. We have to do it ourselves.

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